

The Protocols of the Learned Experts on HEROIN

"The children of each generation are taught to want what they are taught they must not have."

R. G. Collingwood (1939)

Why did the forgery of Janet Cooke's ugly story about an "8-Year-Old Heroin Addict [Who] Lives for a Fix" go undected at *The Washington Post*? Why did it win a Pulitzer Prize? Although these are two quite unrelated questions, the same answer fits both. I believe that this fabrication went undetected and won a Pulitzer Prize because it purported to prove, once more, that heroin is our deadliest enemy.



Janet Cooke

Religious and medical propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding, I hold some simple truths to be self-evident. One of these truths is that just as the dead do not rise from the grave, so drugs do not commit crimes. The dead remain dead. Drugs are inert chemicals that have no effect on human beings who choose not to use them. No one has to smoke cigarettes, and no one has to shoot heroin. People smoke cigarettes because they want to, and they shoot heroin because they want to. Furthermore, so far as the connection between heroin and crime is concerned, I contend that, the propaganda of the anti-drug crusaders to the contrary notwithstanding, this truth is also self-evident: people under the influence of a powerful central nervous system depressant drug, such as heroin, are less rather than more likely to commit crimes than are people who are not under the influence of such a drug; on the other hand, people who live in a society in which the use of certain drugs is popular, in which the sale of those drugs is prohibited, and in which the drug-prohibitions are not enforced, are indeed more likely to commit crimes than they would be in the absence of those conditions. However, since no one is so blind as the man who does not want to see, these truths are quite powerless against popular mythologies, as *The New York Times*' editorial comment on the Cooke affair illustrates. Under the title "The Pulitzer Lie" (April 17, 1981), the editors of the *Times* emphasize their puzzlement:

We do not know what possessed Janet Cooke to invent an interview with an imaginary 8-year-old drug addict who aspired to grow up to be a heroin pusher in the nation's capital. Nor do we know why *The Washington Post* was so quick to claim the protection of the First Amendment when city authorities sought help in locating children so obviously needing help. We do not know why this contested tale was then pushed for journalism's highest honor, or why the Pulitzer Prize judges jumped the entry from one category to another to bestow the award.

Although I do not want to sound (or be) arrogant, I believe that I know the answer to these questions. Indeed, I believe that the editors of the *Times* know it too, albeit they do not want to admit it, or, as Freud has put it, they repress it. And the repressed, as Freud observed, invariably returns.

In this case, the repressed appears in another editorial only a few inches above "The Pulitzer Lie." In that comment, entitled "To Fight Crime, Fight Drugs," the editors admonish the Reagan administration for its insufficient zeal in fighting the drug menace. "The East Coast is currently swamped with heroin," we are informed. "In New York, drug-related robberies and burglaries have more than doubled in three years." But I am afraid that just as Janet Cooke's story about "Jimmy" was not true, so *The New York Times*' editorial about "drug-related crimes" is also not true. The crimes in question are not "drug-related" but "drug-prohibition-related," which is not the same thing.

It is sad how quickly people have forgotten that when Nelson Rockefeller ran for Governor, his principal campaign strategy consisted in placing full-page advertisements in the newspapers showing the arm of a young black male injecting heroin. In the accompanying caption Rockefeller pledged to free the people of New York State from this "plague" and the crime it "causes."

People seem also to have forgotten that only a few months ago Governor Hugh Carey offered this "truth" to explain why so many thugs stole so many gold chains in New York City. "The epidemic of gold-chain snatching in the city," declared Carey, "is the result of a Russian design to wreck America by flooding the nation with deadly heroin." If the Russians "were using nerve gas on us," the Governor continued, "we'd certainly call out the troops. This is more insidious than nerve gas. Nerve gas passes off. This doesn't. It

The Lesson We Should, But Won't, Learn from the Lie That Won the Pulitzer Prize

Thomas Szasz



The original art for "Jimmy's World," the front page story that ran in the Washington Post September 28, 1980.

MICHAEL GNATEK, JR.

Drug-related burglaries are really drug *prohibition*-related burglaries, which is not the same thing.

kills, I'm not overstating the case."

In love and war all is supposed to be fair. The love of saving people from the Devil and the war on Evil have indeed always been regarded as ample justifications for fabricating strategic lies. Let us face it: Cooke's story was not a "weird and atypical hoax," as the *Post* characterized it in hindsight. On the contrary, it was typical anti-drug propaganda, virtually indistinguishable from the standard pharmacomythological tales with which "professionals" and the media have been deluging the American public for the past two decades. If Cooke's story had been "weird and atypical," the editors of the *Post* would have displayed more skepticism toward it and the Pulitzer Prize judges would not have gone out of their way to honor it.

The adjective invariably used to describe the images that Cooke evoked is "shocking." Were a reporter to paint a similarly shocking picture today about, say, Jews poisoning wells or black men raping white women, no respectable newspaper would print the story, nor would it win any prizes. That Janet Cooke's concoction was published and that it won the coveted Pulitzer Prize thus signifies that she tapped a vital artery in America's body politic, a vessel nourishing our most sacred fears and prejudices. There is much evidence to support this view.

First, we have learned that, at the Pulitzer Prize board, one of the most enthusiastic defenders of Cooke's article was an editor from the *Washington Star* who, according to the *Times*, maintained that the piece deserved the prize because it "had done a great service" by alerting Washington residents to the problems of juvenile drug addition." Then, there is the reaction of *Post* readers to Cooke's story and the reaction of *Post* staffers to it, both before and after its exposure as a fabrication. According to *Time* magazine, the editors at the *Post* "were comforted by letters from readers who claimed they knew Jimmy or children like him." At the *Post*, City Editor Milton Coleman was "very frankly surprised" that the police had not located Jimmy, and was so impressed by the piece that "he wanted another story on young addicts."

After the hoax was exposed, *Post* Executive Editor Benjamin Bradlee revealed that the *Post* can dish it out better than it can take it. In an ironic inversion of the Watergate scenario, in a front-page interview in the *Detroit Free Press*, Bradlee incriminated himself by "obstructing" not justice (since no crime had been committed), but what may be even more important, truth (since a lie had been published). Asked "Have you talked to Cooke recently? What happens to her?" Bradlee replied:

Well, I talked to her mother and father, but I haven't talked to her since early this morning. We're going to take care of her. We're going to see that she has professional help. We've talked to professional help about her, and we're going to get it for her and pay for it.

But Janet Cooke is neither a child nor an incompetent mental patient. Why talk to her parents? Why talk to "professional help"? Why call psychiatrists "professional help"? Why pay for the psychiatric treatment of a former *Post* employee who "resigns" to avoid being fired? I object to Bradlee's imposing an "insanity plea" on Cooke. Janet Cooke is a liar, not a lunatic, and Bradlee's casual categori-

zation of her as a mental patient only serves to further diminish his own, and the *Post*'s, credibility.

More recently than most people care to admit, multitudes in the West celebrated their collective revulsion against what they then considered to be evil incarnate, the Jew, and its carrier, "International Zionism," through the mythopoeis of "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion." Today, multitudes in the West celebrate their collective revulsion against what they now consider to be evil incarnate, heroin, and its carrier, the "pusher," through the mythopoeis of what could be called "The Protocols of the Learned Experts on Heroin." The Nazis did not have to invent new lies about Jews. Janet Cooke did not have to invent new lies about drugs.

The infamous "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion" was purported to be a true account of a conspiratorial plan for Jewish world conquest, drafted at a secret meeting of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. The story was first published in the Russian newspaper *Znamia* ("The Banner") in 1903 and was quickly translated into German, French, English, and other western languages. The spurious character of this document was not revealed until 1921. Subsequently, it was established that the "Protocols" were commissioned by the Russian secret police. The full story of the forgery, at least so far as it could be uncovered, was not told until 1942.

We may not know it, or may not want to know it, but we live in an age in which we are deluged with a similar sort of allegedly true, but actually spurious, propaganda—about "drugs." Once such example must suffice here.

Early in January, 1968, Raymond P. Shafer, then the Governor of Pennsylvania and subsequently the chairman of President Nixon's Marijuana Commission, announced to the press that six college students stared at the sun while under the influence of LSD and were blinded as a result. The story was all over the country. Less than two weeks later, *The New York Times* reported that "The Governor, who yesterday told a news conference that he was convinced the report was true, said his investigators discovered this morning that the story was 'a fabrication' by Dr. Norman Yoder [Commissioner of the Office of the Blind]... He said Dr. Yoder, who was unavailable for comment, had admitted the hoax." What happened as a result of this disclosure? Nothing. Dr. Yoder and his lies were disposed of by the method characteristic of our age. Pennsylvania Attorney General William C. Sennet diagnosed Yoder as "sick" and attributed his fabrication to "his concern over illegal LSD use by children." Janet Cooke and *The Washington Post* were no doubt similarly concerned over heroin use by children.

At this point, it is necessary to focus on, and to expose, the key role that the imagery of helpless children—cared for by good people and corrupted by evil people—plays in the rhetoric of scapegoating. Gathering under this banner, the drug-mongers lost no time defending the morality of anti-heroin mendacity, even before the clamor over the non-existent "Jimmy" had died down. For example, William Buckley (who should really know better), pleaded that we "go easy" on Janet Cooke because "the story of an 8-year-old addicted to heroin is, in our wretched times, far from unlikely." No doubt, the idea of the menace of children

as drug-abusers seems "far from unlikely" to Buckley, just as the idea of the menace of children as self-abusers (masturbators) must have seemed far from unlikely to his father or grandfather. It is regrettable, however, that Buckley's boundless fear and loathing of heroin drive him to almost glorifying Janet Cooke by comparing her well-intentioned deception to the demonic deeds of the "pusher." "As one member of the white majority," writes Buckley, "I'd prefer the company of a black newspaperwoman who fabricated a story centered on a mythic *but entirely plausible little victim* [emphasis added] of drugs, to the company of the relatively untroubled black (or white) drug pushers who ride around in their Cadillacs sowing their poison."

But what has driving Cadillacs got to do with the morality of using heroin? Is murder more wicked if the killer leaves the scene in a Cadillac than if he leaves it on foot? If providing people with heroin is a grave wrong, as Mr. Buckley clearly believes it is, then giving it away gratis is at least as wicked as is selling it for a high price. In fact, Buckley is using cheap anti-capitalist rhetoric to whip up hatred against a scapegoat. Moreover, it is implicit in Buckley's argument that selling heroin is very bad, but selling cigarettes is not so bad or not bad at all. Surely, it is unimaginable that Buckley would employ his anti-Cadillac rhetoric against the American tobacco barons and the "pushers" who distribute their toxic products.

Buckley's foregoing remarks articulate what is now considered to be the received truth about heroin. A lead letter in *The New York Times* by Don Russakoff—identified as the President of the Therapeutic Communities of America—illustrates further that the American "experts" know everything about "narcotics" that isn't so. Lamenting that the Cooke story proved to be false, Russakoff actually praises the *Post* for publishing it. "Tragically," he writes, "many other stories about pre-teen narcotic addicts never reach the front page, although they are indisputably true." But none of those stories is indisputably true. And even if they were, it would not follow—except as a leap of faith—that prohibiting the use of certain selected "dangerous drugs" is the correct social policy for dealing with the problem.

Revealingly, Russakoff, like Buckley, also bases his argument on a propagandistic use of the imagery of the child as drug victim. "Not long ago," he writes, "at one of our professional conferences, a physician described the case of a 6-year-old child who had overdosed on 'angel dust.'" And what is that supposed to prove? That perhaps that physician too was a liar? That some parents neglect their children? That we should prohibit vacations in the Alps lest children overdose on poisonous mushrooms—or fall off the cliffs? Buckley and Russakoff are not presenting evidence or offering argument; they are whipping up mindless passion in the people against a scapegoat. Cooke may have written a false story and the *Post* may have been misled into publishing it. But the Satanic threat remains and the vigilance of the vigilantes is now more justified than ever. "The *Times*, *Washington Post*, and many other responsible publications," concludes Russakoff, "have reported often on the worsening drug epidemic. It is real, not imaginary. And a high proportion of its victims are children. *Small children.*" (Emphasis added)

As I suggested some time ago, the contemporary American attitude toward "dangerous drugs" is best understood in religious-mythological terms—that is, as the "ritual expulsion of evil" incarnated in a scapegoat. In the Yom Kippur ceremony, the scapegoat is a goat. In Christian anti-Semitism, it is the Jew. In contemporary America, it is heroin

(and the other illicit drugs). Once people accept something—an animal, a person, a people, a drug—as a scapegoat which incarnates Evil, they ipso facto consider destroying the scapegoat as Good. Consider, in this connection, the following:

- Formerly, Christians feared the Jews because they allegedly poisoned wells; accordingly, the Jews were savagely persecuted. Today, Americans fear heroin because it allegedly poisons people, especially young people; accordingly, heroin and heroin "pushers" are savagely persecuted. In fact, the Jews did not poison any wells, and heroin does not poison anyone. (The difficulty the contemporary reader has in seeing the difference between heroin poisoning someone and a person poisoning himself with heroin is a major symptom of the success of the anti-drug propaganda.)
- People who believe in a scapegoat do not want to understand it, they want to destroy it. When people regard Jews as Christ-killers or vermin, they do not want to understand Jews, they want a society free of Jews ("Judenfrei"). Similarly, when people regard heroin as a "killer drug" or as a worthless "poison," they do not want to understand heroin, they want a society free of heroin.

Perhaps deep in her soul Janet Cooke actually believed that "The Protocols of the Learned Experts on Heroin" were true, and perhaps she simply wanted to support their admonitory tale by adding to it a fresh chapter of her own. Let us not forget that, in the past, many devout persons had dramatic encounters with devils and saints, and no one called them liars; and that, in our own day, many "devout" persons have dramatic encounters with heroin pushers and cured addicts, and no one calls them liars. Janet Cooke told a rousing good tale, as a good writer should. She inflamed the public passion against the Enemy, as a good rhetorician is supposed to. To expect that her story should also be true—when hardly anyone else's about "drugs" is—seems almost unfair.

Concerning Janet Cooke's mythic hero, Jimmy, one more reflection is in order. Some people in Washington actually believed that they knew him. Cooke herself maintained for as long as she could that Jimmy was real. Obviously, there was virtually no way of proving that Jimmy did not exist. All this made Cooke's denial or admission of the forgery exquisitely important. Which leads to my final observation—namely, that it seems quite possible that had Janet Cooke not lied about her academic credentials, her lies about heroin (for which the mythic Jimmy was, after all, only a vehicle) would probably have gone down America's collective gullet of gullibility just as smoothly as have all the other lies about heroin now passing as the received truth.

There is a moral to this story and it is this. No doubt unwittingly, Janet Cooke has done us a favor. She has held up a mirror in which we can catch a glimpse of a prevailing popular delusion. In the future, when people will worship at other shrines, they will scoff at our drug mythology just as we now scoff at the blood and race mythologies of our fathers and grandfathers.

Will we ever learn one of history's more obvious lessons—to be especially on guard against those who lie to us by appealing to the welfare of children? How many Jews were murdered to save Christian children from being turned into matzo? The ritual murder of people has always been preceded by the ritual murder of the truth—and, indeed, by the ritual murder of language itself. □

Thomas Szasz is the author of 17 books, including *The Manufacture of Madness* and *Ceremonial Chemistry*. His latest book is *Sex By Prescription*.